

*Guide to Grasses of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.* By ROBERT I. LONARD, illustrations by Norman A. Browne and Ardath L. Egle. 1993. University of Texas-Pan American Press, Edinburg. vii + 240 pages. \$18.95. ISBN 0-938738-08-9.

This guide presents “a systematic and descriptive enumeration of the grasses of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV), Texas.” As such, it treats 183 grass species, including eight endemics, of the plains, prairies, and marshes of the four southernmost Texas counties, Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron. The treatment is in traditional format (though perhaps not in traditional order): introduction, keys to genera, taxonomy of the genera and species, literature cited, index, glossary, and illustrations.

The focus of the guide is on identification. The Introduction contains a discussion of the structure and arrangement of grass parts, supplemented by illustrations. Descriptions of genera and species are unusually complete and detailed for this type of field guide. Over half (101) of the species are illustrated. The identification keys are flush left, with the two corresponding leads together. This saves space, but prevents the visual clustering of similar species so easily done with indented (or yolked) keys. The keys require an early examination of tiny spikelet parts—identification of *Bothriochloa* demands that the user distinguish at the third and fourth choices the differences among dioecious, bisexual, and reduced florets. I would have hoped for a more layman-oriented approach, using where possible features external to the spikelets, in this case disarticulation, size and texture of glumes, compression, and arrangement of sessile and pedicelled spikelets. For this reason, the guide will serve very well as a lab aid to grass identification in college courses where dissecting scopes and lab instructors are handy. It will be of less benefit to ranchers, naturalists, range managers, and other laymen, though still usable. Perhaps because of the emphasis on identification, the little tidbits and trifles about grasses that intrigue and tantalize us are mostly lacking. The blood-letting blades of *Leersia*, use of *Arundo* for woodwind reeds, the toxicity of *Eragrostis cilianensis*, hidden cleistogamous spikelets of *Leptochloa dubia*, these are the details that we taxonomists often leave out of floras and field guides, but that we most desperately need to include if we are ever going to make our science accessible and interesting to the public. The brief discussion of the four major habitats in the LRGV with their characteristic grasses is an excellent addition in this regard. A little natural history goes a long way.

The most eye-catching feature of this guide is the illustrations. Grouped at the back of the book rather than near the species in question (perhaps only an annoyance), the species are rendered in an unusual reverse white on black format. Seemingly drawn from herbarium specimens, they capture the salient features of the grasses well, though sometimes not in close detail because of size constraints. Unfortunately, some are lacking in contrast and one can't help but squint to try to make the images stand out, but overall, the illustrations will be an excellent aid in identification.

Typographical errors seem to be few and minor. The size (13.5 × 21 cm) is perfect for a field guide and encourages one to stuff it into a daypack on field trips. Deliberate attempts to crack or weaken the binding failed; the pages remained bound.

We need more regional and local field guides like this one. The current emphasis on large-scale, multi-authored floristic treatments (e.g., Flora of the Great Plains, Flora of North America, The Jepson Manual) should never be allowed to undermine the importance of local contributions from the grassroots botanical community.

—KELLY W. ALLRED, Department of Animal and Range Sciences, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003.